



Mentor and leader: Ken Kelsall at Aquinas College in 1988. Picture: Steve Ferrier

DAM AND PIPELINE BUILDER

Bringing water to WA

KENNETH JOHN KELSALL AM

Engineer
Born: Perth, 1921
Died: Perth, aged 94

Ken Kelsall was an outstanding engineer whose technical and practical skills expanded the water industry in WA. He was involved in building 26 dams across the State and his public works included the Stirling Dam, Cape Peron Pipeline, raising the Mundaring Weir and the Ord River Irrigation Scheme.

His was a generation of talented, dedicated engineers whose endeavours provided water supplies to far-flung communities and expanded the spread of agriculture and industry across WA.

Ken was born at King Edward Memorial Hospital in Subiaco on March 11, 1921, the first of Francis and Mildred Kelsall's three children. His father was a linotype operator at *The West Australian*. Siblings Donald and Joan followed Ken.

He began his education at North Perth Primary in 1927, later transferring to St Brigid's school. In 1935 he enrolled at the Christian Brothers College in St Georges Terrace before relocating to Mt Henry in 1938 as a foundation student at Aquinas College. He boarded at Aquinas and was the inaugural captain and dux of the school. The Heritage Centre at Aquinas is a measure of his ongoing commitment to the college community.

At Aquinas, he captained the 1st XVIII football team and was vice-captain of the 1st XI cricket team. As a junior athlete, he won State titles in the 100 yards and the broad jump. He continued his athletics at the University of WA and was placed fifth in the State's first pentathlon championships, organised by UWA in July 1939.

His Leaving Certificate results earned him a general exhibition and a bursary to UWA, which he declined. A preferred cadetship with the Public Works Department in 1939 ensured financial stability and on-the-job experience.

A bachelor of engineering was normally a five-year course but as a national wartime measure, a bachelor of science in engineering could be awarded after three years and the BE completed after the war. Ken was one of four who graduated with a BScE in April 1942. In April 1947 he received a bachelor of civil engineering with third-class honours.

In 1941, after Pearl Harbour, all major engineering projects not directly related to the war effort were suspended. The PWD applied under the Commonwealth National Services Act to have Ken placed on the "reserved occupation" category, in February 1942.

His important strategic defence works for the Allied Works Council included fuel-oil storage tanks in South Fremantle, Albany and Onslow, and the construction of 9.2-inch (233.7mm) Howitzer artillery emplacements at Garden Island. While in Onslow, Ken met Anne McGrath who worked in the post office. In response to the prospect of a Japanese invasion, many moved to Perth. Ken stayed behind. On September 16, 1943, Onslow became the most southerly town in Australia to be bombed when a Japanese plane assaulted the airfield; no damage, no casualties.

Anne and Ken married in Perth in November 1948. The Kelsalls then moved around the South West as Ken expanded his water supply projects. By 1954, there were two children — Alan and Margaret — and a desire to return to Perth. The family settled in Como and the births of David and Peter followed.

Ken developed an interest in designing trotting tracks and, working in an honorary capacity, became a respected authority in Australia. He championed the use of biotechnical principles that enhanced the safety and durability of trotting tracks throughout the State. He was instrumental in the 1985 upgrade of Gloucester Park and in 1995 received the prestigious James Brennan Award for his services to WA trotting.

The mid-1950s onwards was a

major period of water-supply construction. The keen interest was in the Kimberley and the Ord River Irrigation Scheme. By July 1963 the building of a diversion dam to hold back Lake Kununurra was completed. The Ord River Dam, begun in 1969 when Ken was the project engineer and also contract administrator, was opened in 1972. It retains Lake Argyle, Australia's biggest dam area.

Ken told ABC TV in 2008: "I'm not the emotive type but I must admit that when I surveyed the finished dam it did look as good as I hoped it might. It was the highlight of my career."

Perhaps he remembered university visitor Sir James Mitchell's address at his graduation: "Although minds may be looked after by professors, the ploughman is an important person, too." Together the dams today supply water to irrigate 76,000ha of farmland and run a 30-megawatt hydro-electricity plant.

Ken became chief engineer then deputy director of engineering with the PWD. In 1980 he was appointed chief engineer of the Metropolitan Water Board. He retired in 1985. The following year, an Order of Australia recognised his service to the engineering profession and the development of WA water resources.

He served as president of the WA branch of Engineers Australia, as a national vice-president, and was awarded an honorary fellowship of Engineers Australia. His voluntary work included writing and researching the National Trust's Golden Pipeline, a book on the development of the Goldfields water supply.

Ken died after a short illness on February 28. He is survived by his four children, six grandchildren and a great granddaughter. Anne predeceased him in 2007.

His Catholic faith sustained him through his life, illustrating the dictum that faith apart from works is dead. It motivated his compassion for others and inspired his mentoring.

David Hough